

The Man Who Kept His Eyes Shut

By Jack Ritchie

NOTE: Though accepted for publication, this story never appeared in print because the magazine went out of business.

George Turner sat quietly in the chair in front of Dr. Middleton's desk. As usual, his eyes were closed.

Middleton studied him. The man was now fifty-two. Six years ago he had been the president of a successful electronics firm. He had been married and had three daughters. His wife had subsequently divorced him and neither she, nor the daughters, came to visit him any more and perhaps you couldn't blame them.

In the six years Turner had been in the sanitarium, he had never said one word to anyone. Nor had he opened his eyes. At least not as far as anyone knew.

Catatonic, of course. And yet there was something different here. Catatonics did not smile. Yet Turner smiled. And catatonics did not keep their eyes closed. At least not for six years.

Middleton paged through the folder containing Turner's records and then looked up again. "Can you hear me?"

There was no word or sign from Turner that he could.

"Stand up," Middleton said.

Turner stood up.

"Sit down," Middleton said.

Turner sat down.

Middleton shook two aspirins from a bottle, poured some water from the carafe on his desk into a glass, and swallowed the tablets. They were his seventh and eight of the day. He'd have to control that. Too many aspirins made him ill.

Turner had been one of Dr. McHugh's patients, but McHugh had now retired and Turner had been assigned to Middleton.

Middleton had, of course, seen Turner in the building and about the grounds before, sitting in some chair with his eyes closed, but this was the first time he had ever spoken to him.

Turner, in a sense, was an ideal patient. He never caused trouble. He made no demands. He would eat when he was told to eat, would dress when he was told to dress, go to bed when he was told to go to bed. Yes, he would do all of the basic things when he was told to do them, but he would do them with his eyes firmly closed.

Middleton tapped a cigarette out of a pack and lit it. It tasted terrible, but he did not put it out. He would have to cut down on his smoking too.

The phone at his elbow rang and Middleton glared at it before he picked it up.

His father was on the line. Dr. James Middleton. Physician and Surgeon. The Middletons were a medical family. Middleton's grandfather had been a surgeon, too. Both of them had been somewhat disappointed when Middleton had gone into psychiatry instead.

"Son," Middleton's father said, "You haven't forgotten your mother's birthday, have you?"

Middleton experienced a momentary panic. Birthday? And then he remembered. No, he hadn't missed her birthday. It was still three days away. "Of course not, Dad. It's this Friday."

Middleton had once forgotten her birthday. When he was eleven years old. He never heard the last of that.

"What are you getting your mother?"

"I'm considering a few things."

"It doesn't have to be anything expensive. It's the thought that counts."

Middleton sighed. It would have to be something expensive. And he would hear, as

always, "You shouldn't have."

"You'll be over for dinner Friday, of course."

"Yes, Dad. Myra and I will be there at seven."

Yes, he and Myra would be there at seven. They would have dinner as usual. He would drink one glass of wine with the beef. If he took two, his mother would stare at him. So would Myra. And after dinner, they would adjourn to the living room and talk until ten. And have coffee.

His father would ask once again what fool thing had made him decide to become a psychiatrist instead of a surgeon.

Actually when he had made the decision, he had had the support of his mother. In those days it was quite a feather in one's cap to have a psychiatrist in the family. The Golden Days. People stood rather in awe of psychiatrists. But times change. Lord, how they change. Middleton grimaced. Would you buy a used car from a psychiatrist?

"I've entered our names in the doubles at the club," his father said.

"Dad, tennis just isn't my game."

"Nonsense. It's a marvelous sport. You just don't try hard enough. You've got to take more lessons. And practice. That's the key. I average about five hours a week."

They would be eliminated in the first round. As usual. Except for last year, when they had been forced to retire after the first set.

It had been hot on the court. Probably near a hundred degrees. And Middleton had gotten sick. Really, it had been most embarrassing. Would it happen again this year?

When his father hung, Middleton regarded Turner. "How can I possibly help you if you won't talk to me?"

Turner remained mute.

Middleton glanced at his watch. Three-thirty. Damn it, another hour and a half before....

He turned resolutely back to Turner's file. Absolutely nothing here to indicate what might have caused Turner's condition. Happily married, it seemed. Successful business man. What traumatic event had occurred to put Turner in this position?

The key was to get him to say something. Anything at all. Get the cork out of the bottle, so to speak. Trick him into speaking, if he had to.

Middleton's phone rang again. He knew who that would be. His wife called at this time almost every afternoon. He let the phone ring five times before he picked it up.

"Weren't you in your office?" Myra asked.

"No," Middleton said. "I was outside in the corridor talking to one of the staff." Middleton hated to lie. He always felt so guilty about lying.

"Have you forgotten your mother's birthday?"

"No, I haven't forgotten my mother's birthday."

"What do you intend to get her? I've got a few ideas. Do you want me to do the shopping for you?"

"If it isn't too much trouble."

Myra did the birthday shopping every year. Always. She would get something nice for his mother. And then something just a little nicer for herself. You can regard that as my birthday present, she would say. Myra's birthday was next month.

Middleton had known Myra all his life. Their families moved in the same social and professional circles. Myra's father was a doctor too. Internal medicine. Everyone had expected Middleton to marry Myra and so he had.

"I think it's about time I traded in my car," she said.

"You've only had it for seven months."

"I know, but it just doesn't feel right. I think we got a lemon."

She had been at him about that car for a

week now, and she wasn't going to let up. Probably she just didn't like its color.

When he hung up, he stared at Turner again and then decided that he'd had enough of the man for today. He pressed the button on his desk and in a moment an attendant appeared.

"You can take him back to his room now," Middleton said.

The attendant nodded. "Stand up, please, Mr. Turner."

Turner stood up.

The attendant took his arm. "Walk now, Mr. Turner."

The attendant guided him through the open doorway.

Middleton closed the door behind them and returned to his desk.

Why the hell had he become a psychiatrist?

Because it was the only window out. The only escape acceptable to his father and his mother.

God how he had hated medical school and his internship.

The sick people. The afraid. The dying. He would have been surrounded by that for the rest of his life if he hadn't done something about it.

And so he had switched to psychiatry. At least you didn't have to *see* the sicknesses

and you didn't have to *touch* your patients.

Yes, he had become a psychiatrist and now he was stuck with it for the rest of his life. The rest of his whole damn life.

He looked at his watch. Hell, I can't wait until five. I need that drink now. He unlocked the bottom drawer of his desk and took out the half-empty bottle of vodka.

His phone rang and Middleton almost dropped the bottle.

He glared at the phone. Why did he have to answer it? Was there some kind of a divine law that he must?

He closed his eyes.

The phone stopped ringing.

He kept his eyes shut. It was quiet inside here, in this darkness. Out there the phone is still ringing. I *know* it is, but I can't hear it.

I don't need a drink inside here either. I don't need cigarettes. Or aspirins. There are no birthdays to remember. There is no nagging. No tennis. No psychiatry.

I can make myself hear only the things I need to hear.

Stand up, Dr. Middleton. Walk, Dr. Middleton. Sit down, Dr. Middleton.

He smiled.

Yes, this was it. This is what he had been looking for all his life.

He was never, never going to open his eyes again. ♦